

## **Other UDOT Traffic Information Brochures:**

- Speed Limits
- School Zones
- Crosswalks
- Traffic Signals
- Left Turn Traffic Signals
- Pedestrian Signals

## **For More Information:**

Please contact a UDOT Regional  
Traffic Engineer located in your  
region of the State:

Northern Utah (801) 399-5921

Salt Lake County (801) 975-4900

Utah County (801) 227-8019

Southern Utah (435) 893-4799

Or visit the UDOT website at  
<http://www.dot.state.ut.us>

Utah Department of Transportation  
Division of Traffic and Safety  
4501 South 2700 West  
Salt Lake City, Utah 84114-3200

## **UDOT Traffic Information Brochure**

### **SPEED LIMITS**



**Utah Department of  
Transportation**

**Division of Traffic  
& Safety**

**March 2002**



# Speed Limits

The Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) has prepared this Traffic Information Brochure to educate concerned citizens interested in learning more about speed limits.

The setting of speed limits on Utah's highways and streets is often a controversial and emotional issue. Many citizens believe that lowering speed limits will improve traffic safety on their street or in their community. On the other hand, speed limits that are unrealistic are often disregarded by a majority of motorists who are normally careful and law-abiding drivers.

This brochure describes Utah's laws that apply to speed limits on our highways and the procedures for establishing posted speed limits.

## *What is the law?*

All drivers must always obey both the "basic speed law" and the "prima facie" speed limits. Utah's basic speed law (Section 41-6-46 of the Utah Code) is similar to that throughout the United States and says:

No person shall drive a vehicle on a highway at a speed which is greater than is reasonable and prudent under the conditions .

In the absence of posted speed limits, the Utah state law also sets legal speed limits on different classes of highways, which are called the prima facie speed limits. These speed limits are as follows:

-Urban districts	-25 MPH
-Rural interstate highways	-75 MPH
-Other highways	-65 MPH

State law defines "urban district" as "territory contiguous to and including any street, in which the structures devoted to business, industry, or dwelling houses are situated at intervals of less than 100 feet, for a distance of a quarter of a mile or more."

In the absence of posted speed limits, speeds that are higher than those above are considered prima facie evidence that the driver is traveling at a speed that is "greater than is reasonable and prudent".

At some locations, UDOT may determine that the prima facie speed for that class of highway is not reasonable or safe for the particular conditions on a section of highway. For example, a 55 MPH speed limit may not be reasonable in a non-urban developed area with homes and driveways.

State law allows UDOT to establish a new prima facie speed for specific locations on state highways, when it is based on an "engineering and traffic investigation". In such cases, the location on the state highway is typically called a "speed zone", and the speed limit is referred to as the "posted" speed limit.

## *Misconceptions About Speed Limits*

When concerned about highway safety problems, citizens often ask to lower the speed limit. In many cases, the posting of a lower speed limit on a section of highway is an appropriate measure to alert drivers of a change in road conditions, or of hazards that may not be readily apparent.

However, there are many misconceptions that posting a lower speed limit will automatically decrease the speed of traffic, reduce accidents, and increase safety. Setting an unrealistically low speed limit that is not appropriate for road conditions generally has no effect on vehicle speeds or safety. This has been demonstrated in numerous "before and after" research studies of speed limits changes.

The majority of drivers tend to drive a speed that their experience indicates is safe for the road conditions. An arbitrary and unrealistic speed limit may be disregarded and result in disrespect for the law by normally law-abiding drivers.

## *How are Speed Zones Established?*

The procedures for setting of speed limits are based on the following principles of traffic laws.

- The majority of motorists drive in a safe and reasonable manner.
- The normally careful and competent actions of a reasonable person should be considered legal.
- Laws are established for the protection of the public and the regulation of unreasonable behavior of a few individuals.
- Laws cannot be effectively enforced without the consent and voluntary compliance of the majority.

For these reasons, realistic and practical speed limits are based upon observations of the actual driving behavior of the public. Experience has shown that setting a speed limit at the "85<sup>th</sup> percentile speed" (the speed not exceeded by the 85% of the drivers) reflects the behavior of the majority of drivers and results in a safe and reasonable speed limit.

Engineering studies to determine the proper speed limit therefore include actual measurements of the prevailing 85 percentile speed. Other roadway conditions may also be considered in setting of proper speed limits. These include road surface and shoulder conditions, grade, curvature, sight distance, roadside development (parking, driveways, etc.), and traffic accident history.

## *How is a speed study requested?*

A written request must be made to the UDOT Region Traffic Engineer in your part of the State. You may obtain the appropriate name and address by contacting the local UDOT region office at the numbers listed on the back of this brochure.